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# Developing Specialised Youth Soccer Coaching Qualifications: An Exploratory Study of Course Content and Delivery Mechanisms

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The purpose of the current study was to empirically examine the potential course content, structure, and delivery mechanisms for a dedicated elite youth coach education programme in football (soccer) in the UK. By achieving this aim it was the intention of the authors to use the findings of this study for the future development of a customised coach education programme. Fifteen elite coaches, working in youth football at the time of the study, participated in one of three focus groups. Emerging from content analysis procedures, the findings placed specific importance on the development of an athlete-centred coaching philosophy, a focus on behaviours and activities associated with positive youth development, a movement away from traditional practices, and the development of the skills required to learn through reflective practice. In addition, a range of pedagogical approaches, including social approaches to learning, mentoring, and blended learning, were highlighted as ways to better deliver education programmes.

*Keywords*: youth sport, coach education, football, pedagogy

Researchers have recently argued that the coaching process has become dominated by rationalistic assumptions that are out of touch with the reality experienced by coaches (Jones, Edwards, & Filho, 2014; Jones & Wallace, 2006[AUQ1]). In contrast to this seemingly narrow understanding of the coaching process, researchers have proposed that coaching is a more complex, pedagogical endeavour that is inherently influenced by sociocultural factors (e.g., Bowes & Jones, 2006; Hardman, 2008); an argument that has gained credence within both the theory and practice of sports coaching (Jones, Morgan, & Harris, 2012). There is a growing recognition that if coaches, working in any context (e.g., participation, development, performance), are to be educated to be able to understand and manage the relative ambiguity associated with the coaching process, then approaches to coach education need to move away from rationalistic "how to coach" practices (Camiré, Trudel, & Forneris, 2014). Instead, the promotion of a holistic portrayal of the coach that more accurately reflects the reality of coaching is needed (Hussain, Trudel, Patrick, & Rossi, 2012). It has increasingly been argued, therefore, that the aim of coach education should be to develop in practitioners a quality of mind so that they are better equipped to deal with the dynamic nature of their work (Morgan, Jones, Gilbourne, & Llewellyn, 2013).

It is generally accepted that formal and informal coach education is essential to both sustaining and improving the quality of sports coaching (Mallett, Trudel, Lyle, & Rynne, 2009). Despite emphasis being placed on more formal approaches to coach education by awarding bodies (e.g., Sports Coach UK [SCUK]; National Governing Bodies [NGBs]), these methods have come under increasing scrutiny and have received widespread criticism within the coaching literature (e.g., Chesterfield, Potrac, & Jones, 2010; Vella, Crowe, & Oades, 2013). Specifically, it has been recognised that formal courses have become decontextualised from practice, tending to

occur in short blocks of time, usually several months and often years apart, with minimum follow-up, and few opportunities to facilitate the integration of new knowledge into coaching practice (Galvan, Fyall, & Culpan, 2012; Morgan et al., 2013). In addition, the curricular content of such courses has tended to favour the bioscientific disciplines, frequently neglecting the social sciences (Galvan et al., 2012; Jones et al., 2012). Hence, it has been argued that coaches often leave with some understanding of the sport sciences (i.e., physiology, biomechanics) and further knowledge of the technical and tactical components of the sport, but have little appreciation of pedagogical and sociocultural aspects relating to the coach's role (Cassidy et al., 2009). Moreover, formal courses have often followed a mechanistic process that supports the idea that knowledge can be delivered, acquired and implemented in a standardised manner by all candidates in spite of the context of their own coaching practice. Indeed, awards have frequently attempted to present candidates with the distilled "wisdom of expert practitioners" (Lyle, 2002, p. 279) by offering predetermined strategies to overcome a catalogue of perceived coaching dilemmas (Nelson & Cushion, 2006). Such programmes have subsequently been criticised for offering a 'tool box' of professional knowledge that privileges a technocratic rationality, with Partington and Cushion (2013) warning that in sports such as football this has "resulted in an established traditional pedagogy or practice that is characterised by being highly directive or autocratic, and prescriptive in nature" (p. 374). Consequently, formal programmes have been challenged for not facilitating the development of the theoretical and practical knowledge required to help coaches be sensitive to, and better cope with, the peculiarities, intricacies, and ambiguities of coaching and the unique conditions under which coaches act (Jones & Wallace, 2005; Vella et al., 2013).

NGBs have begun to address some of the problems by introducing different approaches to coach education pedagogy (e.g., Galvan et al., 2012). One such approach is that of coach mentoring, which has been implemented, in many cases, between formal course delivery days to support coaches in their natural coaching environment and provide an informal support mechanism (Cushion, Armour, & Jones, 2003; Jones, Harris, & Miles, 2009). In addition, the development of integrating reflective skills as a vehicle to continually self improve and challenge coaching practice, as well as creating communities of practice (CoP) for coaches to share and solve real problems have also been observed. These notions have gained credibility and been described and recommended by many authors within the literature (e.g., Cassidy & Kidman, 2010; Gilbert, Gallimore, & Trudel, 2009; Mesquita, Ribeiro, Santos, & Morgan, 2014). It must be noted, however, that little empirical evidence exists to support the effectiveness of such approaches when integrated into coach education programmes. Further, the process of programme development is often done in isolation of those actually coaching in the field (e.g., the

*end user*), and those who have contributed to the theoretical understanding of coaching (e.g., the *academic*) (McCullick, Belcher, & Schempp, 2005). This is potentially why formal coach education programmes have been deemed as being decontextualised and sanitised, and why 'lip service' is often paid to the pedagogical and experiential approaches that have the potential to enhance the quality of education.

In attempts to improve the quality of sports coaching and, as a consequence, the experience young people have in sport, government led initiatives across a number of countries have been instigated with investment in the provision of large scale coach education programmes (e.g., Australia's National Coaching Accreditation Scheme; Canada's National Coaching Certificate Programme; United Kingdom Coaching Certificate [UKCC]). Such developments have aimed to create more bespoke courses focused on children and youth with a greater emphasis on the specialised skills required to work across a broad range of contexts. These proposals have been outlined in SCUK's 3–7-11 year coaching framework (2006–2016), which has provided the catalyst for NGBs to take a greater responsibility in the development of youth sport coaches and in turn youth specific qualifications are beginning to be offered across a variety of youth sport associations. Specifically, within football in the United Kingdom this has coincided with the Football Association (FA) recognising a shortfall in the development of youth players represented at national team level, which in turn led to the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP). The specific objective of this plan is to create a new pathway for youth coaches working with players aged between 5–21 years. Similarly, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) has recommended that all member associations develop youth specific qualifications up to and including 'A Licence' (UKCC Level four equivalent) by 2014. Such ideas have gained empirical support with authors proposing the need for more specialised coaching qualifications that cater for the varying contexts that exist between age groups and levels of ability (Cassidy & Kidman, 2010; Nash, Martindale, Collins, & Martindale, 2012).

In summary, if a meaningful and valued sport experience for participants, whether it be at participation or high-performance levels, is to be achieved then the development of high quality coach education programmes that focus on specific contexts (e.g., youth sport) becomes an imperative (Stephenson & Jowett, 2009). These programmes have to provide trainee coaches with the opportunity to develop the knowledge (e.g., professional, interpersonal, intrapersonal), skills and experience required for effective practice (within the context in which they work) as well as the chance to develop the 'quality of mind' required for effective decision making and management of the complexities associated with the coaching process (Morgan et al., 2013; Nash et al., 2012). Further, formal courses must be intentionally designed to include material that exposes coaches to their context-specific (e.g., age related) responsibilities as educators and

specific training on how to promote positive developmental outcomes (Vella et al., 2013). It would appear that a range of formal (e.g., workshops, demonstrations) and informal (e.g., reflective practice, mentoring) approaches to learning should be used to achieve such outcomes, although the combination of such approaches that efficiently and effectively facilitate learning and development is a topic in need of attention. Indeed, Cushion, Harvey, Muir, and Nelson (2012) have outlined that researchers are still aiming to understand and accumulate knowledge of what coaches actually do instead of identifying clearer links between the perceived demands of the coaching role and the design and content of coach education courses.

In light of the preceding discussion, the aim of the current study was to empirically examine the potential course content, structure, and delivery mechanisms for a dedicated elite youth coach education programme in football. To achieve this aim, the objectives of the study were to: (a) examine the *make-up* (e.g., knowledge, skills, experience) of an elite youth football coach to offer insights into potential course content; and (b) explore how a course might be structured and delivered through innovative pedagogy to offer an operative learning environment for the development of elite youth coaches. By focusing on these objectives it was thought that context-specific information could be developed that would potentially overcome a number of the criticisms aimed at formal coach education programmes. Importantly, it was the authors' intention to use the information gleaned in this project to develop a customised Level four coach education programme for a home nation NGB of football. Hence, the focus on *elite* coaching (defined in this study as those working in the youth academies of professional football clubs) emerged from the needs of this NGB, and the level and purpose of the qualification.

## Method

### Epistomological Position of the Research

Given the aims of this investigation and the paucity of research available concerning the explicit understanding of the foundations (e.g., content, structure, delivery) of effective youth coach education programmes in football, an *exploratory* approach was adopted (cf. Stebbins, 2001). Specifically, this approach allows for the exploration of new, or under-researched, phenomena in a way that facilitates a better understanding and determines the methods to be used in subsequent research (Maxwell, 2013). This approach emerged from a constructivist epistemological stance, which is underpinned by the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it (Gergen, 2001). Indeed, given the position of the researchers, who support the contention that the coaching process is inherently complex, it is believed that there is not a single, identifiable truth regarding the *what*, *when* and *how* of coach education. As a result, this study attempted to explore the socially constructed realities of those who have been immersed in the field of coaching and coach education. A precise theoretical framework was, therefore, not adopted. Instead the project was guided by the concept of adult (coach) education and principles associated with effective learning (e.g., Morgan et al., 2013).

### Participants

Participants ($n$ = 15) were selected using purposive sampling techniques on the basis that they met predefined criteria and were regarded as 'information rich' cases (Patton, 2002). Participants were selected on the premise that they had at least 10 years of coaching experience within youth football (coaching players aged 12–21 years), with either experience of working with international youth teams or with professional club academies, and were coaching at the time of the study. It was thought that participants meeting such criteria would be best placed to discuss the types of knowledge, skills, and experience that should form a part of a context specific coach education programme as well as the way in which such a course should be delivered and thus meet the aims of this research. The participants were male with ages ranging from 30 to 56 ($M$ = 39.8, $SD$ = 8.7), which produced a diverse range of experiences within the parameters of the study (cf., Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton, 2007[AUQ2]). Participants' experience of coaching within youth football varied between 10 and 18 years ($M$ = 13.3; $SD$ = 2.9), with four having coached age group international teams, eight at professional football academies in the UK, and three in having coached in both settings. Six participants were also qualified coach educators for their NGB. All participants were coaching at the time of the study and held either a Level four ($n$ = 11) or Level five ($n$ = 4) UEFA coaching licence.

### Focus Group Guide

Focus groups have been defined in a number of different ways, but there is some general agreement that they are a research technique used to collect data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher (cf. Stewart, 2014). The use of focus groups for exploratory research is well established in the literature (Maxwell, 2013), and were deemed most appropriate for the current study because, through participant discussion, they would allow a range of opinions to be fostered and thus a more complete and revealing understanding of the issues to be obtained (Cropley, Hanton, Miles, & Niven, 2010).

A semistructured focus group guide was developed that retained a core of standardised questions but allowed for the exploration of participant experiences and any new issues that arose (Cropley et al., 2010). Patton (2002) suggested that this semistructured approach allows for continuity in the procedure whilst accounting for the systematic nature of data collection between different focus groups. A pilot focus group was completed with a matched sample of coaches to those participating in the main study. As a result of the pilot, minor refinements

were made to the structure and phraseology of certain questions in an attempt to add clarity and enhance discussion between participants.

The full focus group guide was separated into six sections. Section one contained an introduction to explain issues of confidentiality, reasons for audiotaping, and a statement of the participants' rights. Participants were provided with a standard set of instructions preparing them for the subject matter and questions. They were also informed of the need for discussion and therefore introduced to their roles and responsibilities during the session. Section two provided the opportunity for the participants to examine and discuss the key coaching characteristics of youth coaches (e.g., what characteristics separate effective from less effective coaches?). Section three expanded the theme of characteristics to focus on the skills coaches need to develop to work effectively with 12–21 year old football players (e.g., what skills would we expect a Level four coach to have over a Level three coach?). Section four explored the knowledge and understanding the coaches had developed within their own career (e.g., what has had the most impact on your effectiveness? What recommendations would you offer to coaches training to achieve Level four?). Section five furthered this discussion by exploring what modules and content should be included with a youth license course to reflect all elements discussed (e.g., what should a Level four course contain from a coaching perspective?). The sixth section was aimed at course delivery and assessment (e.g., what approaches should be adopted to deliver a Level four course?). The premise here was to gather information designed to help overcome the issues previously directed at coach education programmes. Finally, section six provided the opportunity for participants to comment on the focus group process (e.g., do you feel as though you could share your honest thoughts?). All participants acknowledged that they were able to provide information accurately and were not coerced in any way.

## Procedure

Following the award of institution ethical approval, participants were contacted via telephone, informed of the nature of the study and asked to participate. Those who agreed were asked to complete a written informed consent form before being sent a preparation booklet (available upon request), which was designed to allow participants to familiarise themselves with the content of the focus group in an attempt to facilitate the retrospective recall of data (cf., Cropley et al., 2010).

Three focus groups were conducted, each consisting of five participants made up of UK professional club academy coaches ($n = 3$) and coaches working with international age group teams ($n = 2$). Two of the participants in each focus group were also qualified coach educators. Keeping the focus groups small and purposively mixing the participants to sample a range of knowledge and experiences in each group allowed for greater depth of discussion between participants and thus

richer data to emerge (cf., Stewart, 2014). The first author facilitated all of the focus groups to ensure consistency in the process. In addition, the second author acted as support during the focus groups by managing the recording equipment and taking notes, which allowed the first author to concentrate on their primary role (cf., Cropley et al., 2010). All focus groups were video and audio recorded (to improve the accuracy and efficiency of transcription) and conducted in a neutral setting to aid the flow of conversation and avoid environmental bias. Each focus groups lasted approximately 90 min.

## Data Analysis

The focus groups generated 112 pages of single-spaced text. The transcripts were read several times independently by the research team to gain a good understanding of the data. Following procedures advocated by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), the initial phase of data analysis was directed by the four main questions (based on the exploratory aims of the study) that formed the basis of the focus group interviews (characteristics, skills, content, and delivery). Essentially, these provided a deductive framework within which the focus group data were *inductively* content analysed (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Within this framework, inductive data analysis was used, which initially involved identifying and extracting quotations that captured participants' thoughts and experiences. These raw data themes were labelled and those with similar meaning were grouped together to form lower order categories. The lower-order categories were subsequently clustered together to form higher-order themes (Patton, 2002).

Several methods were used to ensure trustworthiness. Member checking helped to ensure the adequacy and accuracy of the information and to protect against potential misinterpretations and researcher subjectivity (Shenton, 2004). After reviewing the transcript of their own interview, all of the participants ratified the accuracy of the data via written confirmation. In addition, at every stage of the analysis, the first and second authors engaged in coding consistency checks where validity was established when the same conclusions were drawn from the data. Peer debriefing was also employed with the third author at each stage of the study to protect against researcher bias; the third author fulfilled a protagonist role.

## Results and Discussion

The results and discussion are presented together to display the findings coherently and avoid repetition (Galvan et al., 2012). In line with the aims and objectives of the current study the results are split into two main sections: (a) the coach (e.g., to guide the content and potential objectives of a programme), and (b) the course. Within each section, the findings are presented with a hierarchical network that represents the emergent themes. For *the coach* there are three main themes: (a) coach characteristics (philosophy and personality), (b) skills and

behaviours, and (c) knowledge, understanding and application. For *the course*, there is just one main theme: course structure and content.

## The Coach

### Coach Characteristics (Philosophy and Personality).

Throughout all focus groups there was an agreement that emphasis needs to be placed on helping coaches to develop and understand their coaching philosophy. It was suggested that this is best done by affording coaches the opportunity to explore their values and beliefs about coaching, as well as their own personal characteristics and different approaches to coaching in youth settings. For example, it was acknowledged, "Coaches have to understand their philosophy for coaching, which is different from their philosophy about football", and, "Without understanding why you want to work in youth football it's difficult to be effective. You have to be clear about what drives you and this comes from your philosophy." Whilst the importance of having a clearly conceived coaching philosophy is not a new idea it has been argued that many coach education courses fail to provide the opportunity for coaches to explore their own philosophies in a meaningful way (Gilbert, 2009). Consequently, the findings of this study suggest that any coach education programme has to provide the opportunity for the exploration and development of candidates' own coaching philosophy in a way that emancipating.

[ID]FIG1[/ID]

Participants were explicitly keen to distinguish between the notions of coaching philosophy and philosophy for football, where they described the former as, "…a set of beliefs and principles about the way in which we practice as coaches", and the latter as, "…your technical model for the way in which the game should be played." Such distinctions have been made previously and it is thought that not understanding one's own values about coaching makes it difficult to understand why we do what we do (Carless & Douglas, 2011; McGladrey, Murray, & Hannon, 2010). This in turn results in coaches regularly experiencing inconsistencies between their beliefs and actions (McCallister, Blinde, & Weiss, 2000). Such ideas were best supported in this study by the comments of one participant who outlined, "Many coaches can explain their playing philosophy, but fail to recognise their values and beliefs and this often results in them saying that they coach in one way but actually behave in another."

One theme that appeared to provide the foundation for a number of other factors related to the 'elite youth coach' concerned the development of an athlete-centred philosophy. One participant stated, "Youth coaches need a philosophy that focuses on the player, many coaches worry about results and forget what individual needs each player has and this stunts their development." Others agreed, suggesting, "The player has to be at the centre of everything we do." Athlete-centred approaches require coaches to embrace goals associated to the individuals' holistic development and have gained significant support in recent literature (Camiré et al., 2014; Kidman, 2005; McGladrey et al., 2010). To establish effective coaching practice, it was therefore outlined in this study that coaches must develop a philosophy that prioritises the personal and social, as much as the physical and psychological, development of young people (cf. Camiré, Forneris, Trudel, & Bernard, 2011; Camiré et al., 2014).

The practicalities of adopting such beliefs in practice were discussed by participants who considered the difficulty in aligning such a philosophy with the philosophy of their employers (football clubs) that may be incongruent with such ideals. It was suggested that, "Being player centred is important but at times you have to be flexible to fit into a club's vision and ideas on player development." This clearly presents a challenge for coaches on two fronts. First, coaches have to be confident in their own ability to effectively adopt an athlete-centred approach as they will be required to adopt different approaches to meet individual needs and thus cannot adopt traditional, prescriptive approaches to coaching (Ford, Yates, & Williams, 2010). Second, coaches have to be willing to question the taken-for-granted routines that maybe adopted by their employers and accept new, more efficacious, approaches to practice (Cushion, Ford, & Williams, 2012).

Other coaching beliefs and approaches to coaching that were linked to the idea of an athlete-centred approach included a 'long-term perspective', which was suggested to be, "A perspective that stops us judging children too early and instead giving them the chance to learn about themselves and develop at their own pace to a certain extent." Youth football in the UK has been criticised for making too many judgments about a player's ability to progress to the next level of the sport too early on in their development (cf., Cushion & Jones, 2006). As a result, many young players end up exiting the sport, or having a poor experience of the sport, due to inappropriate assessments being made about very specific aspects of their performance (Cushion, Ford, et al., 2012).

Participants were keen to establish that elite youth coaches need to develop a perspective that focuses on the long-term development of players in attempts to protect against these issues. Such ideas support the importance of approaches to practice that consider long-term athlete development and the constructs presented in the Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP, Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). For example, in line with the DMSP's contention that deliberate practice can aid the development of elite performance, participants in the current study also advocated that youth coaches must use 'ecological approaches to learning', which were highlighted as, "…practices that allow players to learn in the actual situations that they will face in games", and, "…competitive situations to allow players to learn how to

cope with what they will experience in games." These comments suggest a movement away from the traditional practices that tend to focus on 'training form' (e.g., technique and skill practices) to a greater focus on the adoption of 'playing form' (e.g., small-sided, conditioned games) (Partington & Cushion, 2013). Research has indicated that due to the higher contextual interference that is inherent within 'playing form' activities they are more realistic and relevant to performance and thus have a greater impact on learning and retention (Ford et al., 2010). It would appear, therefore, that if the goals of positive youth development associated with producing independent thinkers, decision makers, and problem solvers the use of game realistic practices should become paramount.

The second order theme of personal characteristics concentrated on those characteristics required to work effectively in youth sport and emphasised the need for coaches to be motivated to work in such contexts. One participant indicated, "Many see youth coaching as a stepping stone to coaching adults, there is a real need for individuals to be motivated to go out with the fundamental aim of working with young players and improving them as individuals", whilst another added, "Working in youth football requires specialist knowledge, skills and attitudes and so coaches in this area have to be motivated solely to developing themselves as youth coaches." These findings offer support for the work of Vella, Oades, and Crowe (2011) who acknowledged the importance that both coach practitioners and coach scholars place on positive youth development and the underpinning motivation that supports effective outcomes.

Similarly, participants also recognised the importance of the type of individuals who are suited to coaching young players to include being trustworthy, enthusiastic, and humble. For example, "The players have to trust you, they are young and see you in a position of power and therefore need to have comfort in that trust for you", and, "Behaviours are infectious especially with young people, if you're not enthusiastic about what you're doing every day then that will have a negative impact on others." Whilst these characteristics are widely associated with effective coaches they are seldom considered as attributes that can and should be developed through coach education pathways. Indeed, it is proposed that coaches should spend time considering the potential impact of demonstrating these characteristics on player development as well as exploring how they might be further developed (Lockwood & Perlman, 2008).

### Skills and Behaviours.

This third order theme emerged as the types of skills and behaviours youth coaches need to learn, develop and apply in the specific context of youth coaching, thus making them different to those required by coaches who work with adults. One participant suggested, for example, "All coaches need to develop relationships but these look very different with young players than adults and as a result require different skills to build them", with another

acknowledging, "Communicating with children is a whole different ball game than communicating with adults." Many of the skills and behaviours presented as first order themes in Figure 2 represent those outlined in the work of Lacy and Darst (1984) and more recently Cushion, Harvey et al. (2012). However, the participants discussed the importance of these in the context of elite Level four football coaches and therefore the way in which such behaviours are interpreted and the significance of the approaches that can be used to develop and facilitate such skills became contextually relevant. Participants in the current study highlighted the relevance of coaches being able to manage the environment, be patient, be flexible in style and assessment, communicate and listen effectively, and use positive modelling (e.g., demonstrations) to assist learning. The significance of these was best summarised by one participant who stated, "There are a number of behaviours that coaches should exhibit and skills that they should have in their armoury that should be a fundamental part of coach education, unfortunately we take a lot of them for granted." This suggestion resonates with research that proposes that coaches have limited training in, or knowledge of, the 'soft skills' required to construct and facilitate suitable environments required for youth development (Camiré et al., 2011). It would appear most appropriate for coach education programmes, therefore, to make the development of these skills as well as the opportunity to reflect upon their application a formal part of the course.

[ID]FIG2[/ID]

Participants were particularly keen to discuss the importance of questioning and challenging through the use of appropriate goals as skills required by the elite youth coach. Participants suggested that, "Questioning and challenging players helps to develop their thinking and problem solving skills and this is what I aim to achieve as a coach", and, "…agreed, I want my players to have the answers to the problems they are faced with so I need to challenge them in the first instance to create a problem and then question them about their actions and solutions." Chambers and Vickers (2006) acknowledged that questioning is a valuable coaching behaviour that encourages athletes' active learning through problem solving, discovery, and performance awareness. Such views are supported by a host of literature in sports coaching (e.g., Cushion, Ford et al., 2012; Cushion, Harvey et al., 2012; Vella et al., 2011). However, research by Partington and Cushion (2013) found that coaches may employ a questioning approach but are likely to revert to a more instructional style if the questioning (and player learning) process takes too long. This would indicate the need to commit to a questioning approach to practice that places the athlete at the centre as well as the need for coaches to develop their ability to ask 'good' questions. This is supported by the thoughts of one participant who stated, "Avoiding closed questions is key. I see so many coaches give loaded questioning like 'yes' or 'no' which

allow for no problem solving, which defeats the purpose of asking in the first place." In a similar vein, participants discussed the value of being able to set appropriate goals in helping players to develop problem solving and critical thinking skills. Again, it was proposed that many coaches take the skill of goal-setting for granted and as such set inappropriate targets or challenges for players, which is likely to have a negative impact on motivation, persistence and confidence (Kingston & Wilson, 2006). For example, it was stated, "I see so many coaches trying to motivate players but without challenging them correctly", another participant commented, "The best coaches I have seen constantly use goals in different forms, individual challenge and team goals, in all exercises to ensure tempo, realism, and competitiveness."

Previous research has examined the preferred coach leadership behaviours in youth sport and is in general agreement that more democratic behaviours are associated with higher rates of sporting success (e.g., Høigaard, Jones, & Peters, 2008). In the current study, participants also recognised the value of empowering players through appropriate practice structure and use of conditions (e.g., rules used in game realistic practices that direct play). Participants suggested that coaches needed to develop the skills to be able to apply these factors effectively, for example, "Youth coaches rarely have the skills to apply correct conditions. Instead they try and impose their own ideas rather than letting players discover solutions. We talk about developing decision makers but the practices aren't developed to allow this to happen." Whilst education programmes often mention them as valuable practices they "do little to help coaches examine the context specific factors that impact on the quality of their implementation." Participants in Partington and Cushion's (2013) study supported this failing in coach education by suggesting that, "Coach education tends to give examples of coaching not the understanding of how to carry it out" (p. 379). Closing the gap between theory and practice in education programmes would help coaches to improve congruence between what they say they do and what they actually do and thus bring their behaviours in line with their philosophies.

Finally, participants discussed the skills and behaviours associated with developing positive relationships not only with their players but also with their parents. One participant suggested, "The coach needs to understand the balance between having a good working relationship with the player and also being able to maintain a professional environment where that relationship does not influence their decisions", with another adding, "I agree, the relationship is key but not only with the player but also their parents because they have such an influence on the player's development too." The importance of the coach-athlete relationship is widely discussed in the sports coaching literature (e.g., Jackson, Knapp, & Beauchamp, 2009; Rhind & Jowett, 2010) and adding to this discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, due to complex and dynamic nature of interpersonal relationships it would be naïve of any coach education programme to attempt to 'teach' coaches how to develop a relationship. Instead, participants suggested that emphasis should be placed on "understanding the components of positive relationships" and "developing skills required to begin a relationship." Consequently, prominence was placed on coaches' communication skills, which included delivery, listening, and interpretation. Considering the implications for coach education, Jackson et al. (2009) found that coaches often overlook look the impact of discourse and use of language on the effectiveness of their communication. They proposed that greater emphasis on helping coaches to develop different forms of communication would likely result in improved practice. We would add that making the development of communication skills a formal part of course content would again close the theory to practice gap and get coaches to focus more specifically on the skills that will have a fundamental impact on their effectiveness.

### Knowledge, Understanding and Application.
This third order theme related to what candidates should be taught as part of an elite youth coach education course and consisted of three second order themes. The first, demands of the game, and second, observation, analysis, and feedback, merely reflected what is traditionally covered on football coach education programmes at Level four (e.g., the physical, technical, tactical, and psycho-social demands of the game; understanding of the key elements of observation; different forms of feedback). Participants were adamant that this 'knowledge of the sport' was fundamental and would only change as the game evolved. However, the participants did discuss that the way in which this knowledge should be used and applied should be more representative of philosophy of youth development discussed previously. For example, participants suggested, "Knowledge about football doesn't really change that much but how it's applied in a youth setting has to be a key focus", and, "Delivery of content knowledge is what needs to be improved, the candidates will already have lots of this knowledge but how they apply it effectively is what they need to develop", and, "Coaches think that because they can feed back that their use of feedback is effective, the elite youth coach needs to know how and when to use different types of feedback."

[ID]FIG3[/ID]

Chesterfield et al. (2010) proposed that those responsible for delivering coach education courses would benefit from considering the relevance and applicability of the various knowledge, methods and perspectives they promote on formal education provision. Similarly, others have acknowledged that coaching courses need to address not only the types of knowledge delivered but also the way in which coaches learn to apply that knowledge (e.g., Cushion et al., 2012[AUQ3]; Høigaard et al., 2008). Linking these ideas to those of the participants in this study, it would seem that the delivery of content knowledge has to take into account the needs of the

individual coach and the situations in which they are working, thus making these different forms of knowledge more contextually relevant. In addition, coaches need to be given the opportunity to apply, reflect and learn from their experiences of working with this knowledge to make more informed decisions about what the knowledge means to, and for, them (cf., Cushion, Ford, et al., 2012).

The final second order theme, practice structure, raised the most in-depth discussion. In line with the suggested philosophical stance of youth coach education programmes outlined previously, coaches highlighted the need for coaches to adopt game-realistic practices that mirrored the competitive environment and placed athlete learning and development at the centre (Launder, 2001). To be able to apply these practices effectively the participants acknowledged the importance of being able to understanding and apply a Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU, Bunker & Thorpe, 1982) approach, and different coaching styles to match the learning needs of individual players. Further, the participants suggested that, in spite of advocating these approaches, trainee coaches should not be dictated to with regards to their approach to coaching. This discussion supports those who have criticised coach education courses for being overly prescriptive and didactic in nature, where a particular approach to coaching is valued over others (e.g., Gilbert & Trudel, 2004; Morgan et al., 2012[AUQ4]). Indeed, previous research has highlighted the dissatisfaction coaches have felt with 'one-size-fits-all' approaches to coaching that have traditionally been championed on coach education courses (cf., Chesterfield et al., 2010). In addition, Peel, Cropley, Hanton, and Fleming (2013) warned against accepting the dogma of one approach to coaching as it is unlikely that the needs of all players will be appropriately served. Support for these arguments is best summarised by the comments of one participant who suggested that:

I think a youth education programme has to have an agreed philosophy but there needs to be the flexibility on the course to allow coaches to explore what approaches suit them and the situation in which they are coaching. The course should add new knowledge but also adopt a critical stance where coaches are encouraged to question this in line with what they already know and do.

Consequently, participants suggested that, "Coaches need to know and understand the different approaches and styles of coaching available to them, but they also need to make a choice about what is most appropriate in a specific scenario", and, "You need a toolbox of coaching styles and the mindfulness to be able to adopt the right style at the right time."

Finally, participants expressed a belief that coaches needed to develop the knowledge, understanding and application of how to structure practice in a way that reduced the amount of time they spent intervening in training sessions. It was suggested that, "The best coaches are able to create the correct practices and games that allows the players to solve problems without the coach needing to constantly step into the session and intervene."

In light of this, TGfU was considered as an appropriate vehicle to enhance the number of problem solving activities players engage in and reduce the time spent in coach intervention, which would inevitably give the players more time in actual play. These ideas are reminiscent of the 'roots and wings' analogy proposed by Ian McGeechan in Jones, Armour, and Potrac (2004)[AUQ5], where coaches should provide the structure (roots) through rules to allow athletes to be clear about the parameters of performance as well as the freedom (wings) for athletes to explore their performance and find solutions to problems associated with competition. This means that coaches have to understand how to develop self-reliance and self-direction in athletes and be comfortable in relinquishing some control over athlete behaviours and performance.

## The Course

### Course Structure and Content.
In addition to the outcomes of coach education courses that are predefined by the awarding NGB, the participants recognised the need to focus on developing more than practice competence by highlighting a number of extended outcomes. These focused on the development of the coach more generally and recognised the importance of helping coaches to improve their critical thinking skills in order for "…coaches to be more innovative in their practices and actions", and decision making skills to "ensure coaches understand what information they need to make the right decision and execute the decision effectively." Whilst many would identify the difficulty of assessing such skills, incorporating individual mentors, embedding reality based problems in group and individual scenarios and constantly facilitating reflection on and in practice are strategies outlined by participants in the current study and in the literature that are integral to coaches operating in high performance coaching environments (e.g., Gilbert, 2009; Lyle, 2002; Mallett et al., 2009). Certainly, including such factors as outcomes on a youth coach education programme would signify a movement away from the norm where the candidates are often removed from the learning process (cf. Chesterfield et al., 2010).

[ID]FIG4[/ID]

The two remaining second order themes (formal and informal learning) have been widely debated within the literature in question of their efficacy for improving learning (for a review see Cushion, Nelson, Armour, Lyle, Jones, Sandford, & O'Callaghan, 2010). Formal approaches to learning have received considerable criticism in this literature, with authors suggesting that formal education is less valued than experiential learning and other less formal opportunities (Trudel & Gilbert, 2006). For example, research has highlighted that courses often give little more than a basic understanding; some of the theoretical material covered is considered too abstract

from everyday practice to be considered worthwhile; and courses can be guilty of trying to cram too much information into a relatively short period of time (Cushion et al., 2010). However, participants in the current study commented, "Some formal learning is good but it has to be integrated with opportunities to make sense of the content and consider what it means to the individual", and, "Those formal elements have to develop into more reality based learning scenarios." In essence, these thoughts resonate with those of Mallett et al. (2009) who recommended that, "Formal education needs extensive and variable experiences to convert situated learning to understanding" (p. 332). The challenge for coach education programmes, therefore, is to be designed in a way that moves from research and theory (formal learning) to practical application (informal learning) (Gilbert, 2009).

Participants suggested that a youth coach education programme would benefit from clearly identified, justified, and measurable "aims and objectives" that are achieved through "a staff-candidate ratio of 1:4." These suggestions are linked to further participant comments that suggested, "The candidates need to be involved, they've got lots of knowledge and experience and we have to consider how that's used and explored on the course", and "Normally on courses the candidates get 'delivered to' but actually they should be at the centre of the learning process and should have a more active part to play." By increasing participant involvement in the formal elements of course delivery through more interactive activities including question and answer, critical discussion, and shared reflection on the formal content being delivered it is likely that participants will feel more empowered and thus more involved in their own learning (Camiré et al., 2014). It is recommended that if courses do adopt such strategies then those responsible for delivery need to assume the roles of facilitator of learning (e.g., to guide the process of learning rather than stifling learning through the imposition of information) and scaffold builder (e.g., to extend that knowledge to a broader and deeper understanding) (Houser & Frymier, 2009). These roles allow candidates to initially be supported through tasks to guide their learning and understanding before the support is gradually removed giving the candidate the opportunity to explore practice based dilemmas on their own (Cushion et al., 2010).

The use of pre and post course tasks was another recommendation from the participants. They suggested, "You come on to the course, go home and forget about everything until you come to the next part of the course. Learning needs to be more ongoing", and, "Yeah, some sort of task before and after the formal contact days would help candidates to consider how the things that they've learnt impact on their own practice." The idea of ongoing learning over the duration of the course might help to overcome some of the issues presented by Chesterfield et al. (2010) who reported that coaches often reverted to their tried and trusted approaches to coaching following completion of a formal qualification. This seems to suggest that on-course learning experiences are often not meaningful to coaches and thus they are discarded once they return to their working lives. Carefully constructed tasks that support the delivery of the indicative course content would help coaches to actually engage with knowledge in the context of their own practice, which is likely to have a greater impact on how they manage the coaching process (Stephenson & Jowett, 2009).

Linked to the ideas of more ecological approaches to learning the participants also suggested that youth coach education would not only benefit from formal assessments that take place in the candidates' own working environment but also from "more informal, ongoing assessment during the course." One participant commented, "The assessments have to represent the philosophy of the course and candidates have to be prepared by being given feedback on their practice on a more consistent basis." The notion of assessment for learning (AfL) is one that is advocated as a valuable pedagogical practice designed to seek and interpret evidence for use by learners and their educators to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to be and how they might get there (Black, Lee, & William, 2005). In essence, AfL is used as an approach to improve learners and support modifications in their knowledge, understanding and practice and could be integrated into education programmes through the use of formative assessments linked to a mentoring process.

The final second order theme, informal approaches to learning, presented a number of pedagogical strategies that have gained support in recent literature (e.g., Cropley, Miles, & Peel, 2012; Cushion et al., 2010; Morgan et al., 2012[AUQ6]). The participants recognised the importance of youth coach education programmes embracing reflective practice, mentoring, and networking opportunities. In regards to reflective practice participants commented, "Reflection is something that gets talked about a lot but I've never been taught how to engage in it effectively…if we want coaches to reflect we have to teach them how", and, "Coach education cannot pay lip service to reflective practice, it has to be embedded throughout the programme." Cropley et al. (2012) proposed that NGBs have a responsibility to systematically educate coaches about reflective practice, facilitate the development of reflective skills, and support ongoing reflection in attempts to maximise the way in which coaches engage in experiential learning. This work supports the ideas of the participants in this study that reflective practice cannot simply be added into a coach education programme but the principles of reflection need to be firmly embedded in the philosophy of the course. Indeed, a range of research has warned against promoting reflection without applying appropriate support mechanisms to help the development of the practice (e.g., Cropley et al., 2010; Gilbert, 2009). In response to their experiences, the participants acknowledged that providing opportunities to work with other candidates, to share reflections and to engage in critical discussion would help to better entrench reflection into a programme, "Reflective

learning groups are used in our club and they work really well as a way of sharing our experiences and learning from each other." Such ideas are consistent with recent work by Gilbert et al. (2009).

The participants recognised mentoring as an integral part of a youth coach education programme. They suggested, "Mentoring has been one of the most influential factors on my development as a coach and it should be a part of any education programme. It should happen in the candidates' club environment too", and, "It links to reflection, having a mentor helps to feed the reflective process, which helps you to learn more than you would on your own." Cassidy et al. (2009) raised an issue regarding the way in which mentoring is defined as a process and suggested that within coach education mentoring should be based on the value of guidance. This supports the participants' previous ideas that the roles of mentors and coach educators is one of scaffolding the learning experience rather than directing the learning experience. Nevertheless, it appears important that if youth coach education programmes are to make the best use of mentoring clear definitions of the role and purpose of the mentor need to be developed so that both mentor and candidate can be clear about the nature of the process (cf., Mesquita et al., 2014; Morgan et al., 2013). Related to the mentoring process, the participants suggested that peer-support and networking through visits to other football clubs could help to coaches to gain a better understanding of how knowledge and skills can be applied in practice and in doing so gain first-hand experience of real-life examples of coaching practice. These activities were suggested to further help close the theory to practice gap that currently limits the efficacy of coach education (Morgan et al., 2013; Partington & Cushion, 2013).

## Conclusion

Coach education has been criticised for being divorced from the reality of the coaching process, focused on principles of techno-rationality, and its rather superficial engagement with the complexity inherent within coaching practice (Jones et al., 2012; Morgan et al., 2013). NGB's have proposed that the development of education pathways that are dedicated to specific contexts (e.g., youth coaching) may be one way to overcome some of these issues by helping coaches to develop the context specific knowledge and 'quality of mind' required to cope and deal with the problematic nature of sports coaching. However, incongruence between coaching practice and scientific evidence has been acknowledged in the design and implementation of such courses (Cushion, Ford et al., 2012). With these points in mind, the purpose of the current study was to empirically examine potential course content, structure and delivery mechanisms for a dedicated elite youth coach education programme in football.

By interviewing practicing coaches who had been educated to a high level, it was thought that the findings of the current study offer ecologically valid insights into the process of coach education. Specifically, the findings suggest that youth coach education programmes should be underpinned by the principles of positive youth development and an athlete-centred philosophy that concerns the holistic development of the individual as a person and as an athlete. Within this structure, trainee coaches should be afforded the opportunity to explore their own values, beliefs and behaviours in accord with the specific contexts in which they work so that they are able to develop a more critical understanding of why they do what they do and how they might make this more effective.

Whilst the skills, behaviours and knowledge recognised as important 'content' in this study are not too distinct from those considered in traditional programmes it was highlighted that focus should be placed on more context-specific application of this content. Similarly, Vella et al. (2013) have suggested that to change coaching behaviour in the messy reality of coaching practice coaches need to be given opportunities that allow the development of practice related skills as well as the support required to transfer of knowledge into practice and into the context in which the coach works. Indeed, coaches should be given the opportunity to explore the utility of different knowledge and approaches to coaching whilst being mindful of the situations in which they work (Mesquita et al., 2014). Emphasis should be placed, therefore, on enhancing coach self-awareness to create a deeper understanding of their behaviours. It is thought that such an approach to youth coach education would help to address the 'epistemological gap' that is thought to exist between theory, practice and application (Partington & Cushion, 2013). It is clear that coach education has to embrace new indicative content and pedagogical approaches if we are to improve the standard of coaching in youth sport. Youth coach education programmes should not prescribe what coaching should be like, for instance (Galvan et al., 2012). Instead it should facilitate the development of the coach and their practice through a combination of formal (e.g., seminar content delivery) and informal (e.g., reflective practice, mentoring, CoPs) approaches to learning that are embedded within the complex reality of the coaching process.

Future research should focus on critical examinations of the potential impact on the development of coach effectiveness that different approaches to coach education have. Indeed, despite the support for these approaches acknowledged in this research there is little evidence to detail the influence they have on coaching practice. If NGB's are to thoroughly buy-in to and invest in coach education reform they have to be sure that such change will result in positive outcomes. It is the intention of the authors to use our findings to now develop and implement a customised elite youth coach education programme. Future research attention should therefore be afforded to the evaluation of programmes that adopt the content, structure, and delivery mechanisms reported in the current study. Again, such attention will help to provide the evidence that might be required for more

sweeping reform to take place in the wider context of coach education.

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*Figure 1.* Elite youth coach characteristics (philosophy and personality)

| 1st Order | 2nd Order | 3rd Order |
|---|---|---|

Focus on LTAD

Willingness to consider long-term goals

→ Patience

Adaptable in practice

Adaptable to change

Focus on meeting individual needs

Forward thinking trends

→ Flexibility

Communication with all key stakeholders

Listening

Interpretation

→ Communication

Focus on strengths

Fairness and Honesty

Management of stakeholders

Building working relationships with all stakeholders

→ Interpersonal Factors and Differentiation

→ **SKILLS AND BEHAVIOURS**

Observation skills in training and games

Demonstrations

Questioning

Practice structure and conditions (games for understanding)

Analysing the opposition

Goal Setting

Translating games into training

Age and player specific

→ Coaching Skills

*Figure 2.* Skills and behaviours associated with an elite youth coach

| 1st Order | 2nd Order | 3rd Order |
|---|---|---|

Understanding performance components:
- Physiology
- Psychology
- Social and lifestyle
- Technical and tactical needs

Individual positional needs

Management demands

Maturation and age specific development

→ Demands of the Game

Observation of individuals, units, and teams in training and games

Use of IT

Processing information to make effective decisions

Providing effective feedback:
- Terminal and concurrent
- General and specific
- Classroom and pitch

→ Observation, Analysis and Feedback

→ **KNOWLEDGE, UNDERSTANDING & APPLICATION**

Planning and organisation for individual sessions, training cycles and season

Creating realistic, simulated training sessions – TgfU

Understanding and application of different coaching styles

→ Practice Structure

*Figure 3.* Knowledge, understanding and application factors of the elite youth coach

| **1st Order** | **2nd Order** | **3rd Order** |
|---|---|---|

Develop coaches who can deal with
the competitive environment

Enhance decision making

Improve confidence and motivation of
coaches

Develop coaches who can manage the
lifestyle demands of youth players

Develop problem solving and critical
thinking skills

Extended
Outcomes

Clear aims and objectives that are
measureable – course/module

Tutor to candidate ratio of 1:4

Pre and post course tasks

Modular structure that includes formal
delivery, group and individual tasks,
and Q & A

Visual, auditory and kinaesthetic aids
utilising technology

Tutor and candidate led practical and
theoretical sessions

Assessment for learning approach

Practical assessments embedded in
context specific realities of coaching
practice

Formal
Approaches to
Learning

**STRUCTURE
OF COACH
EDUCATION
PROGRAMME**

Reflective practice

Communities of practice

Peer and tutor mentoring

Opportunities for candidate
networking

Club study visits

Blended learning
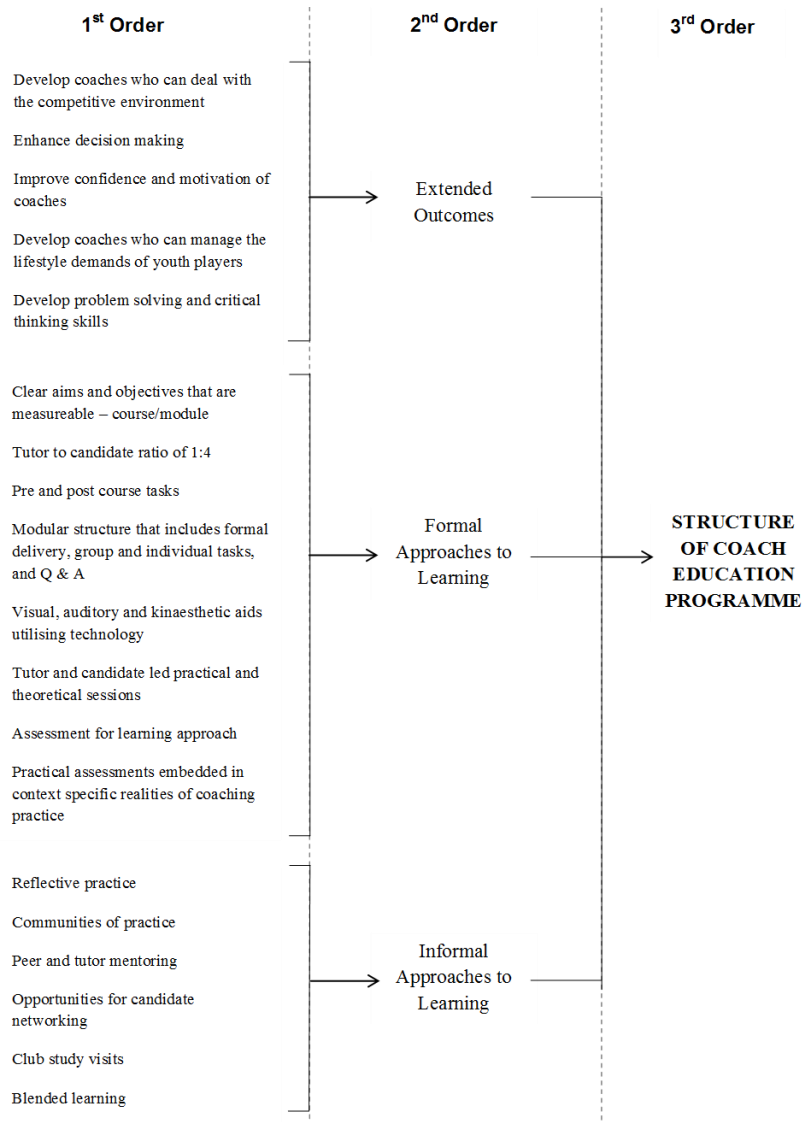
Informal
Approaches to
Learning

*Figure 4.* Elite youth coach education programme structure

**Author Queries**

[AUQ1] The in-text citation "Jones & Wallace, 2006" is not in the reference list. Please correct the citation, add the reference to the list, or delete the citation.

[AUQ2] The in-text citation "Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton, 2007" is not in the reference list. Please correct the citation, add the reference to the list, or delete the citation.

[AUQ3] The citation "Cushion et al., 2012" matches multiple references. Please add letters (e.g. "Smith 2000a"), or additional authors to the citation, to uniquely match references and citations.

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